

# EUROPARC Federation

Report to General Assembly

27<sup>th</sup> October 2015



**Agenda number: 5**

**Title:**

**EUROPARC Internal Auditor's Report**

**Summary:**

**The report of the activities of the Internal Auditor 2014-15**

**Recommendations:**

**To note the report**

## The Governance Report

### Does the work of Council make a difference?

The sub-heading to this report asks if the work of Council makes a difference. I suppose that we could insert the word 'good' or 'useful' to qualify the word 'difference'. But I do like the short and snappy idea of considering whether the work of a board, a council, makes any difference to an organization. I find it is a good challenge when you are starting a discussion about effective board governance. And I do have quite a lot of discussions about boards, because I am interested in them. I joined boards of NGOs that I liked, and found that some of them wasted my time as well as the time of the staff, and so I tried to make the boards work better.

In a longer form, the question might ask if the output of all the volunteer members of council, coming from a range of backgrounds and experiences from across the continent, adds up to making a genuine and useful contribution to the work of the whole Europarc Federation. Of course, it is legally necessary to have a council, a governing body, but as it is presently organized, is its activity worthwhile?

Well, it is hard to say.

In my experience, working within business and non-profit boards, just going through the agenda, reading reports and keeping minutes does not necessarily define a role for the board. I know that this is not the issue at EUROPARC Federation. It is clear about having a vision about where it wants to go, and has hired a CEO to run the staff to deliver programs to deliver the strategy that delivers the vision. There is little cultural tolerance of micromanaging by the board. The board has a clear role. Lots of boxes can be ticked.

But it has been hard to evaluate the work of council this year. It has been working hard despite changing circumstances. It showed itself to be business-like when dealing with the demise of EUROPARC Consulting. There has been a leadership change, of course, and there are some new faces around the table. New people are playing new roles, though some old faces are still around. This will take time to become settled.

During the year, there has been a change in the financial resources that have been available to run the organization's core costs. And this has, in my opinion, seriously affected the work of council. I think that it has been hard to renew a strong sense of common purpose between the council and the executive, but there has been progress. There was a productive meeting in Regensburg in the winter, but a subsequent face to face whole council meeting was cancelled because of the spending cuts. This was quite a set-back. Some members were able to get together on the back of another meeting, but inevitably some momentum was lost.

Other avenues were explored. There have been online meetings, with mixed results, lots of dropped calls, and "are you still there?", "shall I repeat what I said?" and so on. Eventually, a mature software solution has been put in place, and it appears to be robust.

I know that similar organizations have managed, through trial and error, to discover the elusive combination of a software package and skilled personalities that can drive a culture of making easy online meetings. But it is clear that this is a culture that takes time to develop within any group, and this past year has seen a steep learning curve in EUROPARC's capacity to handle a world without as many face to face board meetings as members may have wished for.

New faces have already been recruited onto the council. We must hope that we will be impressed by the breadth of relevant experiences that they will bring to the table. It is clear that EUROPARC Federation needs a board that can lead a cultural change. Unsettled economic times call for new ways of doing things. The council should be able to show all its stakeholders that it has been able to include around the table a mass of relevant experience, as well as a good understanding of the ways it can support those who are serving the protected areas, keeping their loyalty and trust.

I believe that you have to recruit the right people for cultural change. There are new faces who are unfamiliar, who have not yet shown their colleagues what they have to offer. But if council carefully recruits people with diverse skills from a wide pool of talent, including people who have perhaps been involved in similar federations with similar issues of survival, then the broad membership will be well-served, and EUROPARC Federation will flourish.

In my opinion, recruitment of appropriate members and a regular appraisal and evaluation of the members of council will be core to the work of council in the coming years. I am convinced that the President understands there is a need to have a pool of business and NGO experience around him, which will give him sound evidence on which to base his leadership of the council.

The present ad hoc method of recruitment however does not, in my opinion, really serve the membership well. I hope that members of council will think about how they will replace themselves, when the time comes, by talking aloud now about job descriptions, expectations and statements of commitment. Elections are fine, but the electorate does need to know what skills the board needs. A guidance note for voters at the election is not undemocratic, particularly if the outcome is a stronger and more resilient organization, one that can manage its role in a changing culture and so serve its stakeholders better.

And what about the opening question? Well, boards ultimately are all about people, and the best are the people who turn out to have commitment and passion in addition to the skills that we thought we were recruiting for. I think we need to have evidence that the work is worthwhile, that everyone's time is well spent. If the Council looks at its own performance in a systematic way, then I think that it is quite possible that next year we'll be able to say that the Council really did make a bigger difference, a good difference, to the work of the federation. It could possibly say that it made a special difference to the organization by nurturing a culture in which board members and the executive were empowered to perform their particular roles at their very best level.

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20 September 2015